

Blossoming Hope
A Silver Lining Series
Prequel
Lane Anderson



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Chapter One

Columbus, Ohio

1918



Hope walked hastily in the dark night; she had just closed from work. Her back ached, as usual; it was always like this every day. She woke up at 5 am every morning, did some cleaning around the house, prepared, and headed to work.

She was a cook at a local diner, and it had to honestly be the most tasking job ever. She prepared each and every meal and always had to make sure they were no complaints. Because if there were any complaints, she would have to suffer the possibility of being fired or having her salary deducted. This would be very inconvenient, seeing as her job is the only income she and her mother live on.

Her mother used to work as a housekeeper from her teenage years into her early twenties before she met her father, a cook for the same family her mother worked for as a housekeeper. They fell in love, got married, and had her.

Her late father opened his own bakery a few months after he had gotten married to her mother. He always dreamed of having his own bakery one day in the future, so he began to save money until he was able to do so. He was a good cook and had many patrons, even from wealthy families, and they paid well. She and her mother assisted in the bakery; that's where she learned to cook and bake.

On one sad day, her father had gone on a short trip to deliver a pastry order to a family uptown; he never returned home that evening. He was declared missing, but his body and carriage were found down a hill after some days. It was said that he died on his way back from making the delivery, but how he died, no one truly knows. Since his horse wasn't found, it was concluded that maybe he lost control of the horse and got flung downhill. Consequently, the horse ran away. But however, his death transpired; it was a sad

ordeal for Hope and her mother. Till this day, his death still shook them; things were never the same again. They quickly accrued debt upon debt. Eventually, they had no choice but to sell the bakery. After they started losing patronage, Hope dropped out of school. The stress got to her mother, that's when she started falling sick consistently, and the bills kept piling. Things spiraled out of control quickly; Hope got her first job at 18, becoming the sole breadwinner for her family. This all took place a little over seven years ago.

Today's job had ended; Hope took her apron off and hung it on a nail in the kitchen. She went about saying her goodbyes before heading out of the diner to head home. In her hand, she held a little bag containing leftovers; that's how she and her mother fed daily. They ate only once to twice a day, sometimes depending on how much they had at home to cook. From the door of their house, she could hear her mother cough dryly, almost as if she would spew her intestines. It was a cough so severe her mother was left gasping for air. She pushed the door open; rushed into the house in a manner that one could conclude she was being chased. The state in which she found her mother made her heartbeat loudly in her chest from fear. Her mother laid sideways on the floor, folded up, clenching her stomach as she coughed, wheezing and gasping for breath.

"Mother!" Hope yelled and knelt on the floor close to her mother's shaking body. "Are you okay?" Her voice cracked as if she would start crying any minute. She helped her mother up to a nearby couch and helped her sit on it.

"Water." Rosemary, Hope's mother, heaved.

Hope rushed away and rushed back with a cup of water. "Here," she held the cup to her mother's mouth and helped her drink. She took steady gulps till there was no water left in the cup.

"Better?" She asked, searching her mother's teary eyes.

Rosemary nodded and sighed as she slouched on the couch. Hope gave a sigh of relief, then her brows wrinkled as worry clouded her face. "Mother.... How does it feel?"

Rosemary looked at Hope with a puzzled expression. "How does what feel?"

"You, the sickness. How does it feel? How do you feel?"

Rosemary sighed and shut her eyes. "There's so much pain on the inside; I feel so much pain and weakness. It doesn't get any better, Hope. It feels like any day I may close my eyes never to open

them again.”

“God forbid it, mother! It cannot be. God forbid it that I lose you like father. Mother, where is your faith?” Hope rebuked her mother in fear and anger. “This has gone on for far too long; we must do something. We should visit the hospi-”

“With what money, Hope? Yes, we should visit the hospital, but with what? We already have a lot of bills, and it’s already tough on you, seeing as I’m useless now and more of a burden than a mother.”

Hope shook her head, “Mother ple-”

Rosemary held her hand up, pausing Hope in her speech. “Don’t try to make it better. You don’t have to sugarcoat the obvious; every day, I feel more useless than the previous. If you ask me, I think it’s better you let me die.” Rosemary concluded and placed a hot hand on Hope’s forearm.

Hope gasped and threw her mother’s hand off hers, “Well, thank goodness I didn’t ask you. Don’t speak nonsense mother, you shouldn’t have such little faith. You will be just fine. You’ll be well again to go about things as you once did.”

Rosemary coughed, then smiled warmly at her daughter. She couldn’t be more proud of the child she had raised to be so warm, kind, and loving. “You know, you have grown up so fast, and I am proud of the woman you’re becoming. Day after day, I see you work vigorously; it gives me great relief to know that if I don’t make it” – she coughed– “you will be just fine.”

Hope rolled her eyes and looked at her mother sternly. “You are not going to die. I have saved up some money and the day after tomorrow is my day off work. We shall visit the doctor, and we shall find out what’s wrong with you and fix it!”

“That’s not neces-”

“It’s not up for debate.” Hope cut her mother off. “I’ll serve dinner now.” She got up and walked away.

Rosemary sighed weakly as she watched Hope walk away stubbornly. She knew Hope wouldn’t give up on her till the day she would take her last breath. This made hot tears escape from her eyes as she stared at her precious daughter. In all honesty, she didn’t want to die and leave her all alone. The world wasn’t a friendly place, especially to a single woman. She only felt that would be a better option than to remain a burden on her child. She was supposed to be doing all the things Hope was doing so she

could enjoy her young age instead of having her entire life centered and tied around making money so they could survive. She desperately yearned to get better faster to relieve her child of the many things she claimed responsibility for.

Hope walked back with a bowl of food and set it on a stool in front of her mother. She sat crisscrossed on the opposite side of the stool facing her. She said a prayer for the food then they began eating. Hope quickly got lost in her thoughts concerning the conversation she and her mother just had moments ago. That conversation had shaken her to her core. She tried to look unwavering outwardly so her mother wouldn't have more to feast on as they silently consumed dinner. She knew being strong would strengthen her mother. And that's what she wanted, for both of them to stay strong.

"The leftovers are plentiful today, dear."

Hope heard her mother's weak voice cut into her restless thoughts. She jerked, startled. "Um, yes. We didn't have as many customers today." She answered, giving a small smile.

"Mmm." Rosemary hummed lowly in response. Taking a sip of water, she said, "Stop overthinking. I'll go with you to the hospital, seeing as you are ever persistent. I'll be fine; I have you."

Hope smiled, happy that her mother spoke positively. "And you have God. Of course, you'll be fine."

Rosemary stared at Hope with adoration in her eyes. She stretched out, placed a palm on Hope's warm cheek, and slowly caressed it. "Thank you." She croaked out as her eyes began to tear.

Hope held her mother's palm firmly against her cheek, "I'll do anything for you, my dear."

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“No! Stop it. Drop that! Just... Here, give it to me. Morgan!

Wait! Oh heavens!” Mariam yelled as she ran after Morgan.

Morgan Burnett is quite a handful. He is a very active 5-year old and Mariam loved him, but her aging limbs didn't make it any easier. She panted heavily as she ran and chased after him all the way into the courtyard of the diner. She saw him chatting excitedly with Hope, a worker at the diner that Miriam loved. Miriam saw

Hope as a kind, sweet girl who always gave Morgan a treat.

She slowed down as she walked towards them. She bent down when she got there, placing her hands on her knee and breathing heavily. "Oh, good heavens! Morgan Burnett! Never do that again; I'm afraid my limbs may give up on me one of these days. Give me that!" She scolded before snatching a stick out of Morgan's hand. Morgan and Hope giggled.

"Hi Miriam, how are you?" Hope smiled at Miriam.

"Oh dear, this nanny job may just be the end of me, but I am well. How are you?"

"I'm good. And your limbs are just fine, Miriam; you're not that old." She teased. "Besides, I don't think watching over such a cute child," she pinched Morgan's cheek, and he smiled at her in return, "Could be so bad."

Miriam stared at Hope and scoffed, "You know, I'm resigning dear, and Mr. Burnett asked that I find a replacement before I leave. I think you would be well suited for the job, take it up from me. You would make a good nanny, and Morgan loves you already."

Hope blinked at Miriam in disbelief. "You're resigning? Why?"

Miriam sighed, "Oh dear, I think it's time I rest. I'm 58, and it's an exhausting job. A job better fitting for a sweet young soul like you."

Hope bit her lip, "This is too sudden, Miriam." She laughed nervously. "I still have a job here."

"A job where you're not being paid fairly. Working for the Burnett's is a lot better in salary than here, dear, and we both know you need the money." Miriam looked at Hope knowingly.

Hope sighed and pressed two fingers against her forehead. "I do, but this is so unexpected. I love cooking, and this job allows me that pleasure. I'd love to take care of Morgan, but I don't even know anything about the Burnett's."

Hope needed the money, but ever since her first cooking job after her father died, she felt like cooking brought her closer to her father, and it helped her heal faster. So, being offered a job with no relation to cooking made her feel her connection to her father as she cooked could be severed somehow. It was a lot for her to accept. Her primary concern was not the urgency of the placement or leaving this particular job, because honestly, she wasn't being treated the best here, but about losing connection with her father and sanity. Perhaps, if the job came as a vacancy for a chef, she was

sure she'd have jumped at it.

Miriam had no idea about what was running through Hope's mind, but she could see the conflicting emotions in her eyes. "Listen, child, you can think about it. You still have till next weekend."

Hope smiled faintly, "Yeah...." She rubbed her arm awkwardly. She wasn't sure she was going to accept the offer. She had a lot to consider beforehand.

Miriam smiled and clapped her hands, "Great! I'll be looking forward to your response. Well then, we came to get the all-time special. Your chicken soup, as hot and spicy as it comes."

"Yaaaay!" Morgan yelled in excitement.

Hope and Miriam laughed at him.

"Hope! Get back in here! Time's up! Come on!" They heard someone yell; it was Magdalene, Hope's coworker.

Miriam smiled pitifully at Hope. "Looks like your break is over."

Hope nodded, shuffling left to right, "Yeah... I'll package and send your order right out."

"Surely, dear; we'll wait here."

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They sat together holding hands, waiting patiently to be called into the Doctor's office.

"What do you think is wrong with me?" Hope's mother whispered quietly.

Hope thought for a while, trying to come up with an answer to that question because she, too, didn't know and could only pray and believe her mother would be cured soon.

"Oh... I don't know, but what I do know is that you'll be cured soon." She patted their intertwined hands.

"Rosemary Duncan?" A nurse called out.

"Yes! Here." Hope answered, rising to helping her mother stand.

"The doctor will see you now, this way." The nurse announced, leading the way to the door, and then gestured for them to go in.

They got in and sat down, "Good day." Hope greeted.

"Good day, Miss...." He looked down at a file. "Rosemary Duncan?" He looked between the both of them with a raised brow.

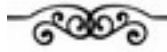
Hope cleared her throat, “Um... her. My mother here is Rosemary Duncan; I’m Hope, Hope Duncan.”

“Hello, doctor.” Rosemary croaked and stretched out a hand for a handshake.

The doctor took her hand in his firm grip, “Doctor Williams. What seems to be the problem?”

Rosemary explained, and tests were carried out. It was confirmed that she had stage two pneumonia, Red Hepatization. She needed to be hospitalized immediately, but that couldn’t be done without a deposit which they didn’t have. It was as if Hope’s worse nightmare had caught up with her.

Chapter Two



Hope laid on her back and stared at the ceiling in the darkness.

Doctor Williams' words echoed in her head. 'We won't be able to do anything further until at least half the money needed for treatment is deposited, Miss Duncan; I am very sorry.'

Tears gathered in her eyes as her mind wandered around here and there, looking for an answer to the roadblock she had suddenly hit in ensuring her mother got back on her feet, healthy and hearty.

Now, she had to figure out where to get such a substantial amount of money. Her pay wasn't even a quarter of the amount needed, but whatever it was, she knew she definitely had to find the money one way or the other.

She heard her mother cough heavily beside her, her body shaking uncontrollably as she let out fits of robust, dry coughs. Hope closed her eyes, and tears trailed as her mind began racing faster for a solution. She finally landed on the idea of asking her boss for a salary advancement the following day; she prayed it would work out in her favor.

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Hope was on her break and couldn't wait to have a moment with Mrs. Barter, her boss, to discuss what has been on her mind the entire day up till that moment where she now stood at her office door knocking.

"Who's there?!" She heard a voice holler from the other side of the door.

"Uh... Hope ma'am." She answered.

"Come on in."

Hope pushed the door open and walked in.

“What’s the matter?” Mrs. Barter asked, staring in concentration at papers on her desk.

Hope cleared her throat, “Ma’am, please could you consider paying me 6 months of my salary in advance? I really need the money urgently.”

Mrs. Barter looked up from her desk at Hope and stared at her for a while. “What for?”

“Um... My mother’s sick, and I need money to pay the deposit at the hospital before she can be admitted.”

Mrs. Barter nodded, “You do know only one-month advance payment is allowed here?”

Hope played with the hem of her apron nervously. “Yes, ma’am, but I really need this money. Please make an exception. My mother’s dying...” She confessed quietly.

Mrs. Barter sat forward, placing her elbows on the desk, intertwining her fingers together, then put her chin on them. “Supposing I could give you this advanced salary payment for the six months... Would it really be enough for the medical bills? Would you be willing to work more hours?”

There was quiet for a moment in the office. Hope knew it still wouldn’t be half of the amount needed, but it was more than she began with, so she hoped the doctor would just have a little compassion and accept that first while trying to gather the rest. And as far as working more hours, she was already working close to 60 hours a week; where would she find more time?

Hope shook her head, “No, but maybe—”

“Maybe? How do you plan on getting the rest of the money?”

Hope looked down at her feet while fiddling with her apron. She had no idea how this was going to work out, honestly.

“Look, dear, I cannot help. I would suggest you try getting a loan from the bank; it’s a better option. I wish you all the best and your mother a speedy recovery.” Mrs. Barter then returned her glasses to her face returning to the work on her desk.

Hope stood there for a while before muttering ‘thank you’ then slowly walked out of the office in a daze. Her day had not yielded the results she desired; she had absolutely no idea what to do or where to turn to for the help she desperately needed.

She remembered what Mrs. Barter advised, going to the bank for a loan. She had no idea of what getting a loan entailed, but it was worth a try. Anything at this point was worth an attempt to get her

mother the medical care she needed. So, she made a mental note to visit the bank later that day.

She got into the kitchen and began working, her mind far away from her current environment.

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She stood and stared up at the sculpted letters that read

‘Columbus City Bank’ erect boldly at the top of the building. She left before closing time at the diner, just before the bank closed, of course, with Mrs. Barter’s permission.

The wind blew past her softly, making her hair fly in different directions, scattering it across her forehead. She breathed in deeply and smoothed her brown hair in place before lifting her chin to walking inside with confidence. She longed for this to go only one way, her getting the loan. She kept her fingers crossed as she pushed the door and walked into the busy banking hall.

People buzzed up and down about the hall; she stood and looked around with furrowed brows till her eyes stopped at a door that read ‘Loan Office.’ She turned and started walking towards the door; with every step she took, her confidence dissipated.

When she was finally in front of it, she knocked softly, and she received an answer almost immediately; it was a deep male voice. “A minute, please.”

She stood to the side and leaned against the wall, folding her arms, waiting, and tapping her foot against the floor almost impatiently. She couldn’t wait to know the fate of this meeting.

The door opened about a minute or two later, and a middle-aged man walked out with a slight smile on his face. He looked content; Hope prayed inside that she looked that way too.

“Enter!” A male voice yelled. She scurried inside and quietly shut the door. She walked to the desk and stood awkwardly in front of it.

“Sit.” The man said to her without taking his eyes off the files placed loosely in his hands.

Hope drew back a seat and sat down and waited for the man to attend to her. While she waited, she couldn’t help but observe his physique. She started at his dark locks, to his muscular arms and

how he rolled his shirt up to his elbows. She had never been so immersed in scrutinizing a man's looks before, but something in her couldn't wait to see his face because she knew this man had to be really good-looking from his physique.

He was still busy reading through the files as though he wasn't aware someone else was with him in the office. Hope tapped her fingers impatiently on the desk in an attempt to grasp his attention.

"Please speak; how may I help? Be quick and concise; I don't have all day." He said in an irritated tone, still without taking even one glance at her.

Hope blinked in shock at how blatantly rudeness. She was taken aback because she thought all office workers were trained to be pleasant and cordial, but this man had been anything but those to her within the 2-3 minutes she arrived.

She shut her eyes tightly and took a deep breath to dissolve the anger beginning to brew within her. "My name is Hope."

"Okay? Move straight to the point, please." The man snapped at her, moving his eyes relatively in view, slightly above the file where Hope was finally able to take heed to the brown specks in his green eyes.

Anger poured through her; she wanted to grab those papers and tear them into tiny pieces. But she refrained, seeing as her reason for being there was more important than any ill-mannered, arrogant loan officer.

She took another deep breath, "I'm here to apply for a loan."

"That is clear, madam; what is the loan for?"

"Hospital bills, my mother's ill." She snarled through gritted teeth.

"How much are you looking to apply for?" He sighed and closed a file, only to open another.

It infuriated Hope that she didn't have his full attention. She knew she wasn't as beautiful as some girls she had come across with her long, curly dark brown hair and icy blue eyes, but she wasn't appalling. Her eyes caught the name tag on his shirt; it read 'Eric.' Well, she thought Eric was a very exasperating man.

She huffed in annoyance, "A thousand dollars." She looked down at her lap, playing with the hem of her skirt.

Eric slowly rose his head up from the file, finally to look at Hope. She was looking down, and her hair formed a curtain around her oval face.

“A thousand dollars is quite a lot, Miss. What do you do for work?” He tried looking past her soft-looking locks dangling across her temple. But she rose her head; their eyes met, blue against green, intensely.

Hope gulped softly at the sight of his face; he looked so handsome with alluring, defining facial features. She didn’t expect him to be looking at her when she lifted her head. She was caught in his beautiful eyes; her eyes trailed down to his lips, which were so soft and pink, she wasn’t even sure she looked half as beautiful as this man.

Eric’s breath was knocked out of his lungs suddenly when he caught sight of her oval face. He thought she was absolutely stunning with thick, long lashes framed her big, soft eyes so blue he could see his reflection in them. She had short brown wavy hair that bordered her rosy-tinted cheeks. Her petite figure was breathtaking, but she stared at him, a bit flustered.

Relentlessly staring at each other as if in a trance for some seconds before Eric cleared his throat and asked more harshly and angrily, cutting the moment short. “I said what do you do for work?” Then he went back to looking at the files to avoid looking at her and getting lost in her ocean eyes.

Hope answered rudely, her eyes burning holes into Eric’s skull. “A chef!” If looks could kill.

“Where?”

“Barter’s Pot.”

“What’s your monthly wage?”

“\$20.”

“Any other source of income besides from that?”

“No, not really.”

Eric looked up at her but avoided her eyes. “So, with such a low wage, how do you plan on paying back a loan of a thousand dollars?”

Hope just stared above his head at the wall where the paint was chipping. “I...I honestly have no idea,” she sighed.

He raised a brow at her, “What valuable properties do you own that is above or around a thousand dollars for collateral?”

The room was quiet, and only the squeaking sounds from the ceiling fan were heard until Hope spoke lowly, “Nothing, I own nothing at all. My mother and I manage a little apartment downtown.”

Eric scoffed in annoyance. "I'm afraid that you have not only wasted your time, but you've wasted mine as well. And as you can see, I am very busy. I'd have to be a complete idiot to agree to a loan on these terms. It's too much of a risk. A risk I'd rather not take on someone who has no collateral and such a low wage. It's not worth it."

Hope's eyes widened as she stared at Eric; rage burned within her. "Please, sir, do not insult me. Your tone is offensive and completely unnecessary." She expressed, her voice going higher by an octave or two.

"Do not raise your voice; this is a corporate environment, Miss. There are other offices around, and people are working. It's so annoying that I have to put up with delusional customers like you daily. And I only spoke the truth; you are one who can't cope with reason." Eric said nonchalantly, which went the extra mile to rile Hope up more than before.

His audacity to sit there all cool and calm while hurling insults at her made Hope's blood boil. "I AM NOT A DELUSIONAL," she shouted with gritted teeth.

"I would advise you at this point to lower the tone of your voice if you don't wish to be thrown out. Now, I would love that because all you've done is waste my time here, but I will save you the shame of being hauled out and let you walk out of your free will. So settle down."

Hope folded her palms in utter frustration. She shut her eyes and took another deep breath, let it out slowly. She opened her eyes to find Eric looking at her with the same glare that had not left his face since she walked into his office.

"So, this is my fate? I do not the loan?" She asked calmly, trying to act casual.

"What does it look like? An insignificant salary, no property for collateral, I'm sure you have no bank accounts. So, please answer yourself, what does it look like? Please, Miss. I have more important matters to attend to." He waved his hand towards the door as to dismiss her from his presence.

They glared at each other for a while before Hope rose and smoothed the wrinkles off her skirt. She stomped angrily towards the door. She slammed the door so hard, it almost fell off the hinges; the entire bank could have as well heard.

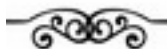
Eric fumed in his chair; he had never been so worked up over a

customer before. This woman was so infuriating he wanted to lug her out of his office himself. Who applies for a loan with nothing in hand? He had met a lot of aggravating people, but she topped the chart.

Hope marched angrily across the bank hall towards the entrance and pushed it open aggressively. She almost hit a customer coming entering the bank. Continuing her irate march, she was nearly hit by a taxi. All that filled her mind was how rude, mean, and condescending that man had been to her. She had never been so furious at anything or anyone, for that matter, in her entire life.

She hailed a taxi; as the taxi drove away, she slumped in the seat and massaged her head with a groan escaping her lips.

Chapter Three



Hope stirred the broth in the pot and put a drop on her hand to taste it. “Hmm, needs a little more salt,” she turned to a coworker. “Celine, are the veggies ready?”

Sounds from a knife on a chopping board echoed in the kitchen. “Almost done, one carrot left.”

Hope sprinkled salt into the broth just as Celine brought the vegetables. Hope poured them into the pot and stirred.

“Hmmm, smells so good, Hope. Your chicken soup is always an everyday special. What’s the recipe? I know I’ve asked a thousand times,” Celine said in a sing-song voice with a cheeky smile.

Hope’s mind traveled some years back when she prepared the soup with her father, it was his recipe, and it was always a special order. She was glad to know that after so many years, it was still an appetizing dish.

Hope laughed, “And I’ve told you several times, it is a secret recipe. Keyword being, secret, Celine.”

Celine rolled her eyes jokingly, “Yeah yeah, I know. But one day, you’ll tell me.” Celine laughed and walked away.

“Let’s wait for that day, shall we?” Hope yelled after her, laughing. “And...Done!” She turned off the fire and called for help to take the pot down. “Thank you boys, we can start taking orders out now. It’s my break; I’ll be out back. Be back in 30.”

She cleaned her hands off with a rag and made her way out the back door into the alleyway. She sat down on a block by the wall and placed her chin on her palm. As usual, her mind began wandering. It had been almost a week since she visited the bank. She had run out of options and had no idea what to do next. Should she borrow? She had no idea who she could borrow such a considerable amount from, how she could even pay back such a huge debt?

She spent her entire thirty-minute break thinking and thinking

and even cried a little. When the tears left her eyes, she didn't know until she felt it trickle down her cheeks.

She didn't hear the door open until she heard someone call her name. "Hope, break's over. You need to get back to the kitchen; we're running low on soup."

She quickly wiped her face clean, "Okay, Dean, I'll be there in 5."

She sat there a little longer before getting up and making her way back into the kitchen with a sigh. The rest of the day was spent preparing one dish after the other, sending out orders.

After the close of work, she took her apron off, hung it on a nail in the kitchen, and then made her way through the double doors.

"Oh dear, I've been waiting out here for you a while now." Hope heard suddenly in the dimly lit room. She jumped, startled before seeing who spoke.

"Miriam, you scared me. I wasn't expecting anyone else to be here." She rubbed a palm on her chest where her fast racing heart was.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I needed to see you urgently. I'm turning in my resignation letter tomorrow; I should be doing so with my replacement ready. Mr. Burnett doesn't want the kids to stay unattended too for long. Have you thought about the offer?"

To be honest, Hope had totally forgotten about it. So, she hadn't given it a thought since their last interaction. "No, I haven't. I actually forgot. I don't know Miriam...."

Miriam took both of Hope's hands in hers, "It can't be so terrible; you said it yourself. The salary is considerably more than current. Yes, the kids can be a handful, but nothing you can't handle. Besides, Morgan is fond of you already."

Hope looked confused, "Kids? I thought it was only Morgan."

"They are two, Morgan and Alice. Alice is just a toddler; she'll be two in about a month from now. And she's such a sweet little girl, don't you worry."

Hope looked indecisive but then thought to ask an essential question that could help her decide. "If you don't mind me asking Miriam. Just how much is the pay?"

"Around \$50 to \$60, I used to be paid \$50."

Hope's eyes almost bulged out of the sockets. "A month?"

Miriam smiled knowingly, "I know, and you need that much."

Hope thought about all the things she could possibly do with

that much money: her mother's hospital bills, house bills, groceries, the list went on. She was in a bind now, but it didn't take much thinking for Hope to know rejecting this offer would be a mistake.

"Alright, I need the money. I'll take the job."

Miriam squealed in delight, "Great! We would be meeting him at exactly 10 am. I'll come get you from here, and we'll go there together."

"One more thing, would I be allowed to cook?" Hope asked; she didn't want to be denied that.

"I don't know, dear; they already have a chef. So, I don't know if Mr. Burnett would have an issue with it."

"Um, okay," Hope said as they walked out into the dark street. Walking home with thoughts of how life would be without the comfort of cooking to ease her anxieties.

....

Hope stared at the clock that hung on the kitchen wall as she kneaded dough to bake pastries. It was only 9:25 am. The time couldn't have been any slower; she anticipated the outcome of the meeting at the Burnett's home. It was one thing to respond to the vacancy and another for them to actually offer her the job.

Hope was enthusiastic, longing for a warm welcome, praying that this family is lenient and kind to her.

While she cut and molded the dough into shape, she was told someone wanted to see her.

She knew who it had to be; it was 9:35 by the time. She was sure it was Miriam. So, she hurried things along with the dough then left the others with instructions on baking them.

She untied her apron and handed it to Celine, "Here, Celine, I'm going to be away for a while. Please take charge of things here, will ya?"

Celine nodded, with an expression of concern, "Okay. Are you okay?"

"Sure, I'll be back later."

She left the kitchen and headed straight to Mrs. Barter's office to obtain permission for her absence.

Shortly, she joined Miriam outside. "Morning, Miriam." She

said, putting her coat on.

“Hi dear, shall we? This is Mr. Burnett’s driver, Charles.” Miriam gestured to the back of a shiny black car for Hope to get in then she got in after her.

“Hello, Charles.” Hope greeted.

Charles nodded at Hope through the rearview mirror with a polite smile. “Good morning Miss.”

As they sat in the back of the car on their way, Hope couldn’t stop fiddling with her clothes, attempting to smooth out any crumpled area, assigning every strand of her hair to a respective place.

“You’re looking very well dear, what’s all the fuss about?” Miriam asked Hope.

Hope was nervous; she couldn’t help but feel like things were out of place. She wanted everything to be perfect.

“Really? I just want to look presentable. I really need this job, Miriam.”

“You look great,” Miriam pinched Hope’s cheeks to bring out a little color on them. “Just smile; that’s the only missing accessory.”

Hope nodded and smiled. For the rest of the drive there, she remained calm and watched the scenery through the window.

It was evident when they had entered the wealthy part of town. All she saw now were beautiful trees lining the sides of the streets, expensive cars parked on the driveways of well-built houses with great architectural designs and beautiful colors.

She was stunned at everything she saw, palm trees standing tall for shade, well-trimmed flowers, healthy green grass, beautiful gardens, and houses behind white picket fences.

“This place is so beautiful, Miriam. I never knew there was such a place.” Hope said with an astonished tone in her voice.

Miriam chuckled, “Indeed it is, but the most beautiful part is yet to come.”

Hope couldn’t help but wonder just how wealthy this Mr. Burnett was to live in such an affluent neighborhood. But of course, they had to be pretty rich to afford to pay a nanny such an impressive salary and owning an expensive car.

Upon arrival appeared a black gate leading the way into the compound. Hope was sure her jaw dropped to the floor.

“Wow! Miriam....This is...” Hope stuttered.

“Beautiful, right?”

“That’s an understatement! This is amazing!” She turned to Miriam with a wide smile just as Charles stopped the car for them to get out, then he drove away.

They stood by the fountain that sprayed water into the air. Hope inserted her hand in the water. The water trickled down her arm, which made her giggle. A few seconds later, Miriam called for her. They walked towards the front door; Hope followed behind her and greeted the gardener who trimmed the plants.

Miriam knocked; they waited for the door to be answered. Then an elderly black woman in her seventies welcomed them, “Oh Miriam, you’re here. Is this the girl?” She stepped to the side to let them in.

“Yes, Joanne, this is her. Her name’s Hope. Hope, this is Joanne, but everyone calls her Mrs. Wellington; she’s the caretaker of this beautiful estate.”

Hope smiled and stretched her hand out for a shake. “Hello, Mrs. Wellington. I’m Hope Duncan.”

Instead, Mrs. Wellington squealed, then engulfed Hope in a warm hug. “Awww, Eric’s going to love her; she’s so beautiful and polite. Nonsense child, call me Joanne.” She released Hope from the hug. “Come, come sit and make yourself comfortable. Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

Hope sat on a soft couch in the living room; the interiors were awe-inspiring and exceptionally pleasing. “Ohh, I’m okay.” She said with a courteous grin.

“Nonsense, I’ll get you a cup right away.” Joanne scurried away happily.

She wondered what all the excitement and buzzing attitude were about. They made her feel like she was a princess who just paid them a visit. And who was this, Eric, that was going to love her?

Her train of thought was cut off by Miriam. “I’ll go get Mr. Burnett now. You just make yourself comfortable, okay dear?”

She nodded lightly; Miriam vacated the room just as Joanne returned with a cup of coffee. “I didn’t know how you liked it, dear, but since you look like a sweet girl, I made it sweet for you. Added milk and sugar; I hope that’s okay?”

Hope took a sip of the coffee and sighed in relaxation. “Hmmm, this is delightful. Thank you so much, Joanne.”

Joanne smiled, and then scurried back towards the kitchen.

She took slow sips of the coffee as she inspected her surroundings until she heard shuffling in the living room. She looked up and saw Miriam. Her eyes moved away to the man who stood beside her and almost choked on the coffee. Her eyes widened; she felt lightheaded. It was him; it was that same Eric, the infuriating loan officer from the bank. Now, Hope was sure she wouldn't get the job, not after their previous interaction.

"Sir, this is Hope Duncan. She's the one I recommend for the job as I leave. Hope, this is Eric Burnett, the owner of this beautiful home and maybe your boss soon." Miriam joked and laughed. It was apparent she was unaware of the tension between the two.

Hope stood slowly, never breaking eye contact with Eric, the coffee long forgotten. Eric glared at Hope with annoyance.

"Hello, sir, you have a lovely home." Hope began.

"Thank you for your services all these years Miriam, you can pick your last paycheck at the end of the month," Eric said out rightly, then began walking away.

"But sir, Hope here is very good with kids. Morgan is already fond of her." Miriam said in confusion; she didn't understand why Eric was acting this way. She is accustomed to his rudeness, but this surpassed his typical discourtesy.

Eric stopped in his tracks without turning around, "How does Morgan know this woman?"

"She's the chef behind the chicken soup you always send for; I take Morgan with me whenever I go to the diner. That's how he knows her." Miriam explained while Hope just stood there awkwardly. She wanted to disappear into thin air. Under normal conditions, she would have picked her bag and took leave, but this was an extenuating circumstance; she desperately needed this job. When she thought of her mother, she was willing to be the bigger person, even if it meant begging.

Eric nodded, "Right. Well, I won't be having that insolent young woman care for my children. She may corrupt them with her ill-manners and outlandish ideologies." He said in an irritated tone, eventually walking away again.

"Ill-mannered? Hope is far from ill-manners, sir. She's anything but. She's a sweetheart, I promise." Miriam defended Hope in total perplexity, for she had no idea what was unfolding before her eyes; Eric spoke as if they had met before.

Eric turned around and looked at Miriam in disbelief, then

pointed a finger at Hope. "This girl? Sweet? No, Miriam. You have the wrong person. She is a brazen and ill-mannered, and I won't have her in my home. And most definitely nowhere near my children."

"Sir--"

"End of discussion, Miriam, please gather her and leave at once."

"Sir, please, be sensible. I don't know if you've met her before or what happened, but I promise it was a misunderstanding." Miriam was pleading ever desperately now.

Hope felt this was the time for her input. "Please....Hear me out. That wasn't me that day, Mr. Burnett."

Eric and Miriam turned to her, but Eric responded, "So you're saying it was someone else that looked exactly like you?" He asked with a mocking tone.

Hope held herself from being sarcastic; instead, she shook her head, "No, it was me, but the brashness wasn't me. I was just weary and desperate to get help for my mother. As you know, she's deathly ill, and I really need this job, please." Her voice cracked at the end, almost as though she was about to cry. "But you were rude to me and very insulting, if I might add." She couldn't contain her displeasure. She quickly placed her hand to conceal her mouth, ensuring her utterances would cease.

"You being worn-out and overwhelmed by burdens doesn't give you the right to be rude to people," Eric snarled. "I wouldn't have spoken that way if you weren't wasting my time."

Miriam's eyes went wide as she gaped at Eric; habitual behavior for such a broken, grief-stricken man. He was mean and rude to everyone who worked in his home, with the minor exception of Joanne. It was one of the many reasons she was quitting. So hearing him recite such inaccuracies about someone who was the complete opposite of him was quite deplorable.

Hope cleared her throat, "My sincerest apologies, it won't happen again. Please don't send me away; I really need this job, Eric."

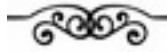
A silence filled the room instantaneously before Eric spoke up.

"It's Sir or Mr. Burnett, from here on going forward. You start your one-week trial on Monday, and if I find you unfit for the job, you'll leave immediately. Mind your manners and the way you speak around the children and to me, most importantly. If you truly

want to be taken seriously, respect yourself and keep your distance. We'll negotiate your salary when we're sure you're well suited for the job. That'll be all." He divulged in a harsh tone; he turned, ascending the steps without waiting for a reply.

Hope discharged a sigh of relief as she recoiled back on the chair. She didn't know whether to feel appreciative for this opportunity or vexed that her soon-to-be boss was such an arrogant, coarse human being. Nonetheless, she was grateful at least for getting to the first stage. She's one step closer to being able to pay her mother's hospital bill; all she had to do at this point was prove to Eric that she could do this.

Chapter Four



Monday morning, Charles arrived early to pick Hope. He honked his horn twice to let her know he was waiting.

"Coming!" Hope scurried about the house gathering her things. She went to her mother and gave her a light peck on the cheek. "I'm leaving now, mother; wish me luck."

Her mother smiled weakly at her, "You don't need it, dear, somehow you've always managed to have a hold of things. You surprise me all the time."

Hope smiled back at her mother, "It comes from you and father's amazing genes. Very soon, Mother, you'll be okay. I'll make sure of it." She caressed her mother's cheek lovingly.

Before her mother could reply, Charles honked loudly this time, he was getting impatient, and Mr. Burnett hated tardiness.

"Coming! Mother, I have to leave now. Will you be alright?"

Her mother nodded, "Yes. Thank you."

Hope headed to the door, "Alright, Mother, see you later." She opened it and went outside. It was a windy morning.

"Hi Charles, Good morning. Sorry for the delay." She said, getting in the back of the vehicle.

"Good morning Miss. It's not a problem." Charles said, and then started driving out.

"You know you can call me Hope."

Charles saw her smiling through the rearview mirror; he smiled back but didn't say anything in response, and Hope knew he wasn't planning on calling her Hope anytime soon.

The drive to the Burnett's house wasn't very long, and in no time, they were driving into the compound.

Eric watched Charles drive inside, and he could see Hope in the backseat. He had been waiting for Charles to return to see if Hope would return with him; something in him wanted to see her again. He didn't know what was wrong with him, but he found himself

thinking about her often since their encounter at the bank a week ago. So, when she showed up at his house inquiring about the nanny job, he was shocked and surprised, angry but a bit delighted. He allowed the anger to overwhelm every other feeling and asked her to leave even though he didn't mean it.

He ushered Miriam the chance to give him a reason to let her stay even though he kept countering it. But deep down, somewhere in him, he wanted her to stay. He could have easily still denied her the job, but that was hard to do after she spoke and he heard her voice. The same voice he couldn't get out of his head for almost a week now. So, he gave her the job and said she was on trial when in his mind, she had fully gotten it the same way she had managed to fully weave her astounding essence into his head with just one meeting, he could draw her face without having to ever see her again.

He strived to convince himself that the mere need to get back at her for how she conducted herself and acted towards him at the bank made it difficult to get her out of his head. In any case, he knew he was lying to himself. He enjoyed being capable of riling her up. It's just that something in him liked the way she challenged him. She was bold, and he knew that she was doing so much to stop herself from giving him a piece of her mind the day she came for the job because he could see her clench and unclench her fists, and it only made him smirk inside.

With all these thoughts running through his head, he grew furious in consequence, angrily punched the glass window he stood in front of. Naturally, it shattered into several pieces allowing a strong wind to blow past him.

He fled the room with the same vigor down the stairs; prepared himself to inform Hope of her chores and duties as a nanny. The moment he saw her standing in the living room, her beautiful eyes scanning the room the same way it scanned it the first day she came there, He felt a brief moment of bliss. Swiftly he snapped out of his lasciviousness and was pestered at the sight of her; he stomped down the remaining steps to get her attention.

The stomping got her attention; she turned her eyes towards him and smiled. "Good morning Mr. Burnett; how was your night? I hope you slept well?"

He walked lazily towards her, "Never mind how I slept."

Her smile dropped, and silence fell upon them as they stared

each other down until Hope dropped her gaze, and it caught the red bruises on his hand.

"Your hand," she said with genuine concern.

Eric looked at it; he didn't even notice his bruised hand. "Yes, never mind it." 'It's what you caused anyway.' He thought to himself.

Just then, they heard footsteps descending the stairs; they turned towards it.

"Ah, Mother. You're here; good morning."

Hope looked at the woman; she looked a bit stuck up from the way she carried herself. Her jet-black hair was in a tight, low bun, red lipstick colored her lips, and expensive jewelry adorned her neck, ears, knuckles, and wrists. You could tell from the stern disposition that Eric was indeed her son because they both stood side by side staring at Hope with identical grimaces.

Hope cleared her throat awkwardly, "Um... I'm sorry; good morning, ma'am."

Eric's mother examined Hope with a look of disdain and pure judgment in her eyes. "Hmm, is this how you dress for a job interview?" She said with her head raised high and her nose stuck in the air.

Hope looked down at her worn-out clothes and shoes. She could have selected a better dress, she supposed, but she thought her attire was well-suited for a nanny. Embarrassment washed all over her as she stood staring at the floor and counting the tiles.

"Eric, who is she? Another one of the maids?" She heard Eric's mother speak.

"No, Mother. She's the new nanny. The one you're here for." Eric replied, pointing towards Hope.

"Oh...." Eric's mother replied with dissatisfaction lacing her tone. "I expected the new nanny to have a bit older. Like the other one. What's her name.....Um, Mary or something rather?" She eyed Hope. "You have to keep a leash on this one; make sure the children are the only ones she's tending after." She whispered or tried to because Hope still heard her.

"Mother, please," Eric said.

"What? I'm just speaking the truth."

They were now talking as if she wasn't there until she cleared her throat loudly to get their attention and let them know she was indeed still standing there.

They both turned to her with the same stoic expressions. Eric spoke, "At any rate, Miss Duncan, my mother here arrived yesterday. She's here to supervise you during your trial since the nature of my job won't allow me to be around much. If she's not impressed, then I'm not impressed. And she's quite the 'no nonsense' type of woman, so it's going to take a lot to impress her, and that's why I trust her judgment."

All the while Eric spoke, the mother kept a face full of pride and gawked daringly at Hope, who just ignored her and focused on Eric instead.

"Any questions?" Eric asked, Hope with a straight face.

She shook her head 'no.'

"Also, you'd be required to use your voice when asked any questions; otherwise, the children believe you are a mute."

"No, no questions."

"Great!" Then Eric looked around her as if searching for something. "Where is your luggage? Bags?" He asked inquisitively.

"What? I don't seem to understand you, Sir." Hope answered with a puzzled expression.

"What luggage, son?" His mother, too, asked in confusion.

"This is a live-in job Miss Duncan, didn't you know?" Eric lied; it wasn't actually a live-in job; he didn't know why he was saying that. "It'll be better for you to get faster acquainted with the children." That's what he tried to believe rather than accept the feeling of wanting her around.

Hope looked so puzzled. "I wasn't told that."

Eric's mother looked at him weirdly, "Since when, Eric?"

"Since now, your services would be required around the clock, so it's best you move in today."

"Today? But my mother, she doesn't know about this."

"That's why Charles will take you back home, and whilst you get your things, you can inform her."

"But sir—"

"If you have an issue with that, you can leave, and we'll get someone more suitable." He said with finality. "Make a decision and make it fast."

Hope sighed, "I don't have a problem staying, but my mother can't be left alone."

Eric thought for a moment and blurted out almost without thinking, "About that, Charles will drop your mother at the hospital

for her treatment to begin immediately. We'll talk about the bill when I get home from work later this evening. Any other excuse?"

Hope blinked confusedly, "Sir...I don't understand."

"What's so hard to understand? Your mother will be escorted to the hospital for treatment; we'll talk about the bill when I return."

"There's a deposit that needs to be paid, Sir." Hope said lowly.

"Don't worry about that; Charles will take her to my doctor. He knows what to do. Anything else?"

Hope shook her head dazed; she didn't understand. Was this man actually going to help cover her mother's bills? Maybe he wasn't as bad as she thought.

"Joanne!" Eric yelled.

"Yes, Eric. Hi dear," Joanne smiled at Hope. She ignored Eric's mother; they never really liked each other.

"Hi, Joanne," Hope smiled back.

"Joanne, please get me, Charles."

"Okay." Joanne walked towards the front door.

"Eric dear, are you really about to pay the bills of a stranger? They could be gold diggers for all we know." Eric's mother said in a worried, hushed tone to her son.

Hope looked at Eric's mother, wondering exactly why this woman took issue with her. She had insinuated that she has ulterior motives twice now.

"Mother, don't worry," Eric said just as Charles walked in.

"Yes, Sir," he said, "good morning, ma'am."

"Good morning," Eric's mother answered as she made her way up the stairs but not without giving Hope a death-defying glare.

"Yes, Charles, take Miss Duncan here back home to get her thing, then take her mother to Dr. Fitzgerald, tell him I sent you. Hope would speak to him on the nature of the sickness so he can begin treatment for her immediately."

Charles nodded, "Right away, Sir."

"Joanne, when she gets back, shows her to her room."

Joanne almost squealed; she was over the moon that Hope would be staying. She had been lonely in that big mansion alone. "Yes, Sir. No problem, Sir."

"Good, that's all," Eric said as he left, making his way up the stairs. Hope stood watching him depart, wondering what was happening.

Joanne wasted no time in going to hug Hope tightly, "I'm so

happy you're staying. This house won't be as lonely anymore."

Hope giggled, "I'm not sure I'm that fun to be around."

"Oh, nonsense; I'm sure you're much fun."

Charles cut in. "Miss, shall we?"

"My name is Hope; you can say it," Hope smirked at Charles, who just smiled back and started for the door.

"He isn't going to call you Hope even in a million years, child. I've been trying to get him to call me Joanne for an eternity." Whispered Joanne to Hope, they both giggled.

"Well, you better leave now so you can be back early enough to get acquainted with the kids," Joanne said and walked with Hope to the door.

"Where are they?"

"Upstairs, still in bed. They wake up by 8 every morning."

Hope looked at the wall clock hanging in the living room. "It's almost 8."

"Ah, yes. I have to go now, dear, to prepare their bath and breakfast. See you later," She scurried away.

"Yes, bye," Hope answered and walked outside where she found Charles already waiting in the car. She got in, and they drove away.

Eric stood at his broken window, watching them drive away while clutching his now bandaged hand. He picked up this briefcase and suit jacket then faded into the hallway.

He walked to the children's room; saw Joanne trying to wake them. "Joanne, call Frank to get my room window fixed; it broke."

Joanne looked at him after observing his bandaged hand, "Oh dear, you broke it, didn't you? You should give yourself a break, Eric." She stared at him with a warm motherly gaze.

Eric sighed, "I'm fine, Joanne, have a good day." He darted down the stairs, pushing past Joanne.

"You didn't even say good morning to the kids, Eric," She yelled after him, but he didn't respond. She sighed and looked at Alice in her cot as she fussed, her big green teary eyes staring up at her. She picked her up, rubbing her back, and gradually walked towards her prepared morning bath.

Later in the day, Hope returned and was taken to her room. The visit to the doctor went well. Her mother had been successfully admitted. She sat on the bed, conceding to her mind wandering through the possible things that could happen now that Eric had taken one of her biggest worries off her. She couldn't help but think

there was a catch to it, somehow. Instinctively she knew that the catch would be something unfavorable. Had she just sold herself to the devil? She was sure this job would come with many challenges; it wouldn't be the smoothest. She laid back on the bed and continued to journey through her thoughts; she found herself doing that a lot recently. In a flash, she fell asleep.

Hours later, a knock on her door startled her awake. She awoke, stretching and rubbing her eyes. The knock came again, louder this time and accompanied by Joanne's voice. "Hope, dear, are you there? Eric's back and requests your presence."

Hope jolted off the bed upon hearing Eric's name. She looked at the wall clock and realized that she had slept almost the entire day. She ran to the door and opened it. "Joanne, hi. Um, so sorry, I must have dozed off."

Joanne looked at her with gentleness in her eyes, "That's alright, dear. Come now, I'll take you to him."

They walked down the hall past a few doors before stopping in front of one; Joanne knocked.

"Yes, come in," Eric answered from the other side of the door.

Joanne opened the door and ushered Hope in. "Good evening Mr. Burnett." Hope greeted Eric as Joanne left the study, leaving them alone.

"Yes, Miss Duncan. Have a seat. How is your mother?"

Hope laced her fingers as she sat opposite of him. "She's been admitted by Doctor Fitzgerald. It's stage two pneumonia; he said he was going to proceed with treatment immediately."

"Yes, and he has. I can call to pay the hospital bills immediately following our conversation." Eric said, pinning her with a stare.

Hope looked confused, "Sir, if you can do that for me, that would be the best thing anyone has ever done for me in a long time."

Eric nodded, "I have a proposition for you, Miss Duncan." He gave a slight mischievous sneer.

Hope looked at him; she had been waiting for the condition. The moment she dreaded has finally arrived. Her palms were sweating, panic steamed down her spine, causing her heart to stab her chest with each hammering beat. 'What could it possibly be?' She contemplated silently.

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